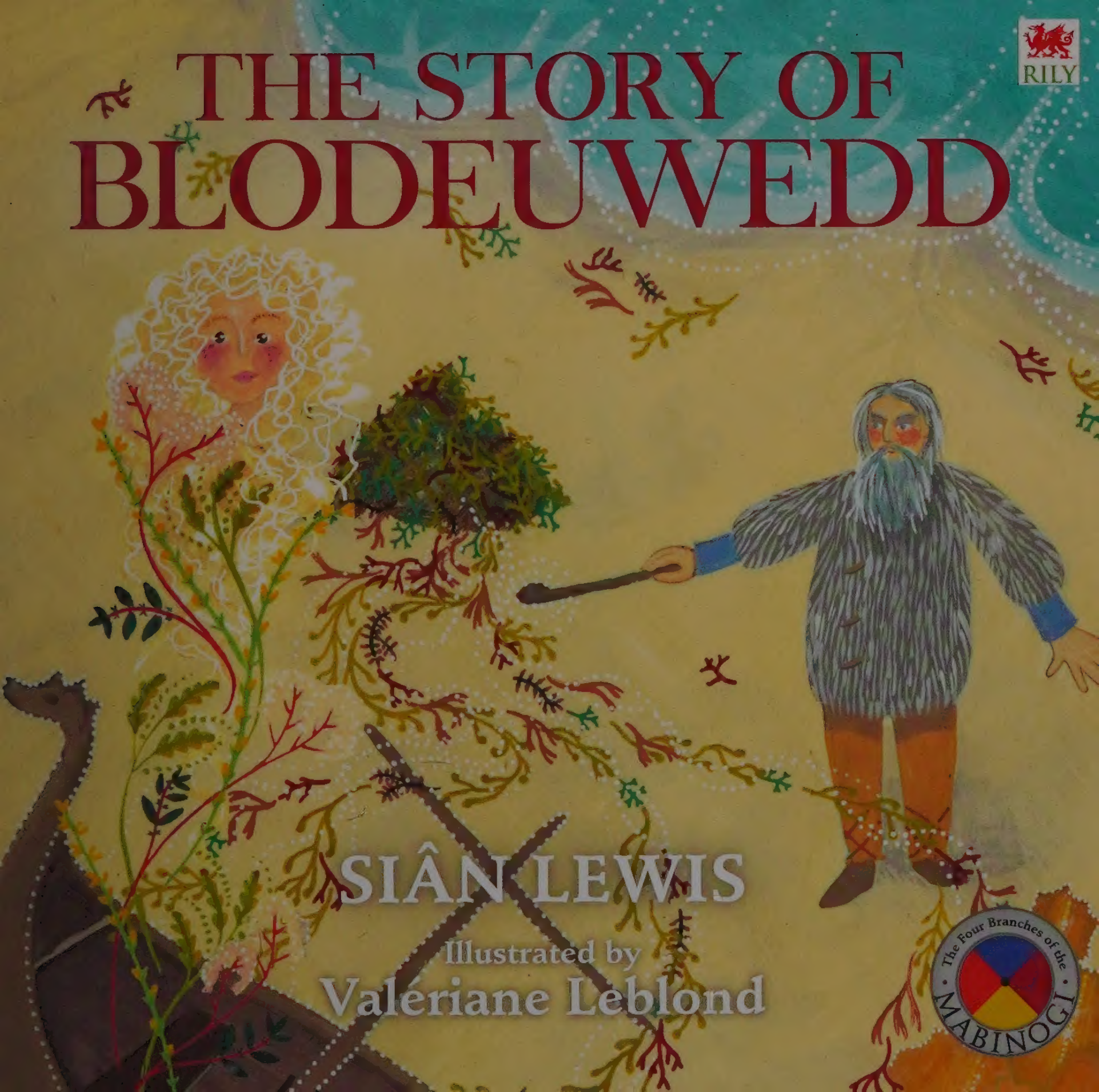
THE STORY OF BLODEUWEDD



SIÂN LEWIS

Illustrated by

Valériane Leblond

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The Four Branches of the MABINOGI

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THE STORY OF BLODEUWEDD

For Rhodri and Catrin
S. L.

For Wyre, Alban and Nebo
V. L.

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Who's who in the

STORY OF BLODEUWEDD

MATH
Lord of Gwynedd

GWYDION
Goow-eed-eon
the wizard

ARIANRHOD
Ah-ree-an-rhod
sister of Gwydion and Math's maid

LLEU LLAW GYFFES
Ll-ay Lla-oow Guff-ess
Arianrhod's son

BLODEUWEDD
Blod-ay-oow-eth
wife of Lleu

GRONW PEBR
Gron-oow Peb-ber
Lord of Penllyn, Lleu's enemy and Blodeuwedd's lover

MABINOGI MAPS

BRITAIN (THE ISLAND OF THE MIGHTY) AND IRELAND

WALES
The Story of Blodeuwedd
1 Caer Dathl
2 Caer Arianrhod
3 Dinas Dinlleu
4 Cwm Nantlleu
5 River Cynfael
6 Penllyn
7 Mur Castell
GWYNEDD
DYFED

MATH THE MAGICIAN, Lord of Gwynedd, needed a maid to care for him. Arianrhod, sister of Gwydion the wizard, went to see him at his court in Caer Dathl.

'I'd make you a good maid,' she said.

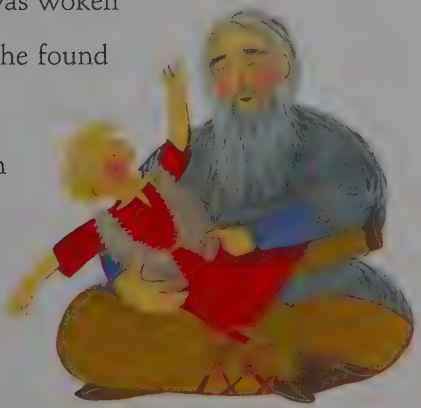
Math looked into her blue eyes. 'Do you have any children?' he asked. 'I don't want a woman with children.'

'I have none,' Arianrhod replied. That was a lie. Arianrhod had two sons. One was old enough to leave home, but the other was a small baby. The baby was hidden in a chest at the foot of her brother Gwydion's bed.

'If you have no children, then you shall be my maid,' Math said to her.

That very day Arianrhod joined Math at court, and forgot all about her little boy.

Early next morning Gwydion was woken by a baby's cry. In a wooden chest he found his little nephew wriggling and throwing aside the sheets. Gwydion picked him up and went in search of a nursemaid, because he could not take the boy to his mother.



The boy grew very quickly in the nursemaid's care. At the age of one, he could run and talk like a two year-old. When he was two, he could wander around on his own. Gwydion was proud of his nephew and loved him dearly.

When the boy was four, he looked like an eight year-old, and Gwydion decided to take him to Caer Arianrhod to meet his mother. Arianrhod welcomed them both to her home with a warm smile.

'Gwydion! How good to see you,' she said. 'And who's this fine young man at your side?'

'Don't you recognise him?' said Gwydion. 'He's your own son.'

'Hush!' Arianrhod's smile disappeared. She dragged Gwydion to a quiet corner, and demanded, 'Have you come here to make trouble for me?'

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'No!' said Gwydion. 'I thought you'd be happy to see your son.'

'Happy?' snorted Arianrhod with a curl of her lip. 'What's your boy's name?'

'He has no name as yet,' replied the wizard.

'Then he'll never have one,' said Arianrhod spitefully. 'Only his mother can give him a name, and I'm not going to do that. Not ever!'

Gwydion couldn't believe his ears. 'You're a wicked woman!' he called over his shoulder, as he led his nephew away.

The wizard was angry. A boy couldn't live without a name. Everyone would make fun of him. But Arianrhod was right. Only a mother could name her son. Somehow or other he would have to make her change her mind.

The very next day Gwydion took the boy down to the shore and wandered among the heaps of seaweed at the water's edge. Out of one heap he conjured a sailing ship. Out of another he made the best and softest leather in the world. The wizard and the boy loaded the leather onto the ship, and together they

sailed to Caer Arianrhod. Along the way Gwydion cast a spell to change their appearance so no one would know them.

From the window of her castle Arianrhod watched the approach of the ship and its crew.

'Who are those two men?' she asked.

'They are two shoemakers,' her servants replied. 'Look at the leather they have on board. It's shining like gold.'

'Indeed it is,' said Arianrhod greedily. 'Measure my feet at once. I must have a pair of golden shoes.'

The servants measured their mistress' feet and took the order

to Gwydion. But instead of following the measurements, Gwydion made shoes that were far too big.

The shoes fell off Arianrhod's feet. 'These are no good,' she grumbled to her servants. 'Go and ask for a smaller pair.'

The servants hurried back to the ship. This time they returned with shoes that were far too small.

'I suppose I'll have to go down to the ship myself,' said Arianrhod with a grunt of annoyance. 'I must have a pair of golden shoes.'

Arianrhod marched down to the shore and boarded the ship. The old shoemaker measured her feet, while his little fair-haired companion played with a heap of pebbles. When a wren landed on the ship's mast, the boy flicked a pebble that struck the bird on its leg.

'What a good shot!' called Arianrhod to

the boy. 'You're a real *lleu llaw gyffes*.'

'Ha!'

Arianrhod recoiled in dismay. Before the words were out of her mouth, the shoemaker and his assistant had begun to change shape. The ship vanished, leaving her stranded on a bed of seaweed. Beside her stood Gwydion and the boy who was her son.

'Ha!' said Gwydion once more. 'You've just named your son.' He smiled at the boy. 'Lleu Llaw Gyffes, the Fair-haired Lad with the Skilful Hand, that's the name your mother has given you. You couldn't ask for better.'

'Lleu Llaw Gyffes!' The boy laughed with delight, but Arianrhod flew into a rage.

'You've tricked me!' she shouted at her brother. 'But I shall have my revenge. I promise you this boy shall never carry arms,

unless I arm him myself. And I don't intend doing that. Not ever!' The gravel flew beneath her feet as she made her way back to the castle.

Gwydion and the boy went on to Dinas Dinlleu, and made their home there.

Lleu grew into a handsome lad. He was an excellent horseman, but unlike his friends, he could not bear arms. This made him unhappy.

'Cheer up,' said Gwydion to him one day. 'Tomorrow you and I are going on an errand.'

The next day Gwydion and Lleu rode to Caer Arianrhod. Before they reached the castle, Gwydion cast a spell that turned them both into young men, though the wizard looked a little older than Lleu.

'We are two poets from Glamorgan,' Gwydion told the porter at the castle gate. 'Tell your mistress that we have come to entertain her with stories and songs.'

Arianrhod welcomed them joyfully. A banquet was laid out in the hall, and after the meal was over, Gwydion told his stories. He was an excellent spinner of tales. Arianrhod's eyes gleamed in the firelight as she listened to him.

That night Gwydion and Lleu slept at the castle. While it was still dark, Gwydion rose from his bed and summoned his magic powers. By daybreak there was a blaring of trumpets, followed by loud wails that made the very walls of the castle shake.

Arianrhod ran to warn her guests.

'We're under attack!' she cried. 'A fleet of ships is approaching. What shall we do?'

Gwydion looked down at the rows of ships beneath the

castle walls. 'Make sure the doors and gates are shut, then get ready to fight for your life,' he advised. 'My friend and I would fight with you, but we have no weapons.'

'I'll find you weapons,' promised Arianrhod, hurrying away.

She returned with two maids, who brought arms for each guest.

'There's no time to lose,' said Gwydion. 'My lady, would you please arm my friend, while your maids assist me?'

'Yes, of course,' said Arianrhod. She took the weapons from a maid, placed a helmet on Lleu's head, put a shield in his left hand and a sword in his right.

The moment she let go of the sword, the noise died away. Arianrhod looked out of the window. The sea was calm and there were no ships in sight.

'Where have they gone?' she cried.

'They were never there,' replied a familiar voice.

The two poets had disappeared. In their place stood her brother Gwydion and her son, Lleu, with a sword and a shield in his hands.

'I've tricked you again, Arianrhod,' said Gwydion.

Arianrhod clenched her fists. 'I've armed my son,' she spat, 'but I tell you this. He shall never have a wife. He shall never marry any woman from any family on this earth.'

Gwydion bowed his head sadly. This time he was unsure what to do.

Gwydion went to see Lord Math and told him what had happened.

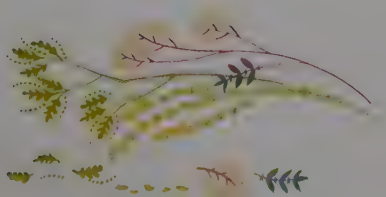
Math was dismayed at the cruel behaviour of his maid. He was fond of Lleu. 'If Lleu can't marry any woman from any family on this earth,' he said, 'then we must make a wife for

him. We are both magicians, so why don't we gather wild flowers and turn them into a beautiful young woman?'

A wife made of flowers? What could be better?

Math and Gwydion gathered the flowers of oak and broom and meadowsweet. They were dainty and bright and scented the air. Gwydion cast a spell, and from these flowers he made a wife for Lleu. She was as pretty as the flowers and her name was Blodeuwedd.

Lleu fell in love with Blodeuwedd, as soon as he set eyes on her. They were married soon after, and set up court in Mur Castell, where Math had given them land and a castle. Lleu ruled his estate with great care. He enjoyed his new life, and his servants admired him.



But Blodeuwedd was less happy. The wild flowers were stirring in her blood and making her restless.

One day, when Lleu had gone to see Math, Blodeuwedd was standing miserably at her window. Life was so boring. Lleu was never at home. Every day was as dull as the next. In the midst of her sighs, she heard the sound of a horn. A stag ran past the castle, followed by a pack of hounds and men on horseback.

Blodeuwedd called her servant. 'Who are the hunters?' she asked.

'Gronw Pebr and his friends,' the man replied. 'Gronw Pebr is the lord of Penllyn.'

Late that night Blodeuwedd saw Gronw Pebr return.

'Invite him in,' she told the servant. 'Lleu would never let a nobleman pass by his gate without offering him food.'

The servant took the message to Gronw Pebr, who

accepted gladly.

'Thank you, my lady,' he said to the beautiful young woman who was waiting to greet him. Her yellow hair, as bright as broom flowers, took his breath away.

Blodeuwedd prepared a banquet for her guest, and throughout that night she and Gronw talked and laughed together. He was such excellent company that Blodeuwedd could not bear to see him go. She loved him already.

So Gronw stayed for three days and three nights till it was time for Lleu to return. By that time he too had fallen in love, and plotted with Blodeuwedd to kill her husband.

When Lleu arrived home, he noticed his wife was very quiet.

'What's the matter?' he asked.

'I'm worried about you,' said Blodeuwedd in a small voice. 'I'm so afraid you'll die before me. If that happened, I'd be

heartbroken.'

'It won't happen,' replied Lleu firmly.

'How can you say that?' asked Blodeuwedd.

'Because it's not easy to kill me,' said Lleu, patting her arm. 'You see, I can only be killed by a brand new spear, and no ordinary spear at that. The man who makes it, must work on the spear every Sunday for a year.'

'But what if there is such a spear?' Blodeuwedd quavered.

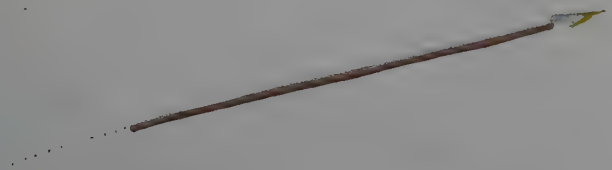
Lleu smiled. 'Even if there is,' he said, 'I can't be killed inside a house nor outside. I can't be killed on horseback either, and I'm perfectly safe if my feet are on the ground.'

'Goodness!' said Blodeuwedd. 'You're a lucky man.'

'I am indeed,' said Lleu. 'In fact there's only one way I can be killed. If a tub were placed on the riverbank beneath a roof of twigs, and if I stood with one foot on that tub and the other on the back of a billy-goat, then the special spear could kill me.'

'Goodness!' repeated Blodeuwedd. 'Then you're perfectly safe.'

But Lleu wasn't safe at all. That very night Blodeuwedd sent a message to Gronw Pebr telling him exactly how to kill her husband.



Gronw cut a stout branch, and every Sunday for a whole year he worked on the spear that would kill Lleu. When the spear was ready, he sent a message to Blodeuwedd, and hid on a nearby hill.

Blodeuwedd went in search of her husband, who had just returned from a visit to Gwydion.

'Lleu,' she said. 'Do you remember telling me that story about the tub and the billy-goat? I still can't quite understand what you meant. Could you show me?'

'Of course,' said Lleu. 'I'll do it now.'

So Blodeuwedd ordered her servants to place a tub on the bank of the river Cynfael beneath a roof of twigs. Then the goats were brought down from the hills and one billy-goat placed beside the tub.

When all was ready, Lleu jumped onto the edge of the tub

and stood one-legged.

'Now watch,' he said to his wife. 'I have one foot on the tub and I'm going to place the other on the animal's back.' With that, he stretched his left foot towards the goat.

At that very instant Gronw Pebr got to his feet and hurled the deadly spear. No sooner had Lleu's foot touched the animal's back than the spear pierced him through the middle. With a terrible screech of pain the young man turned into an eagle and flew into the woods on faltering wings.

Without a backward glance Blodeuwedd took Gronw Pebr's hand and led him to Mur Castell.

'I am now the lord of this castle,' said Gronw.

'Yes,' said Blodeuwedd to the servants. 'Gronw Pebr is now your master.'

Gwydion was worried sick. He hadn't heard from Lleu for many a long month.

'I don't know where he is,' he said to Math. 'He's disappeared.'

'Then you must search till you find him,' urged Math.

Gwydion went away. He searched through Gwynedd and Powys, but could not find Lleu. At last he came to a house in Arfon, where he was offered a bed for the night.

The owner of the house kept pigs. As night fell, a huge sow strolled onto the yard. The servant was waiting at the pigsty, and

when she was safely inside, he closed the gate after her.

'That's a strange sow,' said the owner to Gwydion. 'Every morning, as soon as the gate is open, she rushes off, and doesn't come back till nightfall. I've no idea where she goes.'

Gwydion's magic wand quivered in his hand.

'Tomorrow make sure I'm up before you open the sty,' he told the servant. 'I'm going to follow that sow.'

Early next morning the sow trotted out of the sty and made her way to the Nantlleu valley with the wizard at her heels. When she reached the valley, she rushed towards an oak tree and began to snuffle around beneath its branches.

Gwydion crept closer. To his surprise the ground was littered with scraps of rotten meat. The wizard peered up through the leaves and saw two sharp eyes stare back at him. On the topmost branch of the oak stood an enormous eagle. The bird opened its wings, and showered Gwydion with scraps of its prey.

Gwydion shivered with excitement. Could that eagle be Lleu? He looked up at the bird and sang a verse of a song.

"Between two lakes the oak tree lies
Darkening the vale and darkening the skies.
Lleu, Lleu, we know it's true.
It was the flowers did this to you."

At the sound of his voice, the eagle gave a cry and flew halfway down the tree.

Gwydion sang a second verse. Before it had ended, the bird had swooped to the lowest branch.

When Gwydion sang a third verse, the bird flew to him. The wizard tapped him with his magic wand, and the feathers, the beak and the claws fell away. In his arms lay Lleu Llaw Gyffes, as pale as a sheet and as weak as a lamb.

Gwydion placed Lleu on his horse and took him to Lord Math at his court in Caer Dathl. The doctors of Gwynedd came to attend him, and he stayed at the court for one whole year.

By the end of that year Lleu was as strong as he'd ever been.

'I'm ready to regain my castle,' he said to his friends. 'Gronw Pebr will pay for this.'

Math called up the men of Gwynedd, and Gwydion himself led them to Mur Castell.

Blodeuwedd heard the sound of horses' hoofs. 'Lleu's coming! Lleu's coming!' she cried, and she ran from the castle taking her maids with her.

Blodeuwedd fled towards another castle on the far side of the valley. But she could not outrun the horses. She and her maids looked over their shoulders in panic and, by doing so, failed to see the deep lake that lay in their path. The maids fell headlong into the water and drowned. Only Blodeuwedd was left alive.

Blodeuwedd kept on running, till she felt the warm breath of a horse on her neck. The shadow of the wizard hung over her.

She screamed and hid her face from him.

'Ha!' said Gwydion. 'I shan't kill you, Blodeuwedd. I'll turn you into a bird of the night. You'll be too ashamed to come out by day, and all the other birds will hate you.' He struck Blodeuwedd with his wand, and with a wailing cry an owl rose from the ground and hid deep in the branches of a tree.

In the meantime Gronw Pebr had fled back to Penllyn. From there he sent Lleu a message.

'I have done you wrong, Lleu,' he said. 'How can I make it up to you? Will you take land? Or gold? Or silver?'

'I want only one thing,' was Lleu's reply. 'I want you to stand on the bank of the Cynfael, in the very place where I stood when you threw that spear at me.'

Gronw could not refuse. He went to stand on the bank of the river Cynfael, in the place where Lleu had stood. But first he

placed a slab of rock on the bank to protect him.

Lleu stood on the opposite hill and hurled his spear.

Gronw heard the whistle as it flew through the air, and then he heard nothing. The spear had shattered the rock and killed him stone dead.

As Gronw fell to the ground, an owl screeched in the woods.

Gwydion turned to Lord Math. 'We made her so beautiful,' he said sadly, 'but it wasn't enough.'

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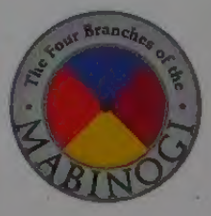

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